

SYPHILIS

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a complex sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It is often called “the great imitator” because many of its signs and symptoms resemble those of other diseases.

How do people get syphilis?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth which means that it can also be spread by kissing someone with a sore in their mouth or on their lips. Transmission of the organism occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with syphilis can pass it to their unborn babies.

What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis in adults?

- **Primary Stage** – The primary stage of syphilis is the time between infection and the start of the first symptom, typically a range from 10 to 90 days (average 21 days). The first symptom is usually the appearance of a single sore (called a chancre), but there may be multiple sores. The chancre is usually firm, round, small, and painless. It appears at the spot where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts three to six weeks, and it will heal on its own. If adequate treatment is not administered, the infection progresses to the secondary stage.
- **Secondary Stage** – The secondary stage starts when one or more areas of the skin break into a rash that usually does not itch. Rashes can appear as the chancre is fading or can be delayed for weeks. The rash often appears as rough, red or reddish brown spots both on the palms of the hands and on the bottoms of the feet. The rash also may also appear on other parts of the body with different characteristics, some of which resemble other diseases. Sometimes the rashes are so faint that they are not noticed. Even without treatment, rashes clear up on their own. In addition to rashes, second-stage symptoms can include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and tiredness. A person can easily pass the disease to sexual partners when primary or secondary stage signs or symptoms are present.
- **Late Syphilis** – The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when the secondary symptoms disappear. Without treatment, the infected person still has syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms. It remains in the body, and it may begin to damage the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, and liver; and bones and joints. This internal damage may show up many years later in the late or tertiary stage of syphilis.

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- Tertiary Stage – Late stage signs and symptoms include not being able to coordinate muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

Can a newborn get syphilis?

Yes, a newborn can get syphilis. Depending on how long a pregnant woman has been infected, she has a good chance of having a stillbirth (syphilitic stillbirth) or of giving birth to a baby who dies shortly after birth. If not treated immediately, an infected baby may be born without symptoms but could develop them within a few weeks. These signs and symptoms can be serious. Untreated babies may become developmentally delayed, have seizures, or die.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

Only laboratory tests can confirm whether someone has syphilis. Health care providers can diagnose syphilis by examining material from a chancre (infectious sore) using a special microscope called a dark-field microscope. A blood test can determine if the body produced syphilis antibodies, which stay in the blood for months or years even after the disease has been successfully treated.

How is syphilis treated?

A single intramuscular injection of penicillin will cure a person who has had syphilis for less than a year. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. Other antibiotics are available for individuals allergic to penicillin.

Will syphilis recur?

Having syphilis once and receiving treatment does not protect a person from getting it again. It may not be obvious that a sexual partner has syphilis because the sores can be hidden in the vagina, rectum, or mouth. A health care provider will determine the need to be re-tested for syphilis after treatment. It is important that individuals be screened for syphilis regularly if their sexual behaviors put them at risk for STDs.

How can syphilis be prevented?

To avoid STDs abstain from sexual contact or be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. Correct and consistent use of latex or polyurethane condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis only when the infected area or site of potential exposure (the sore) is protected.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 1-800-232-4636, TTY: 1-888-232-6348 in English and Spanish
- Treatment guidelines, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis.htm>
- Neurosyphilis, Ocular Syphilis, and Ootosyphilis, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/neuro-ocular-oto.htm>
- Screening recommendations, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/screening-recommendations.htm>
- Syphilis fact sheet, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis-detailed.htm>